

NZSFC Fisheries Management Update 21

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Caught a Crayfish lately?

If you are struggling to find a legal size crayfish for that special family dinner you are not alone.

Crayfish is a popular target species for recreational fishers, yet in some areas they are scarce because undersized fish are being taken by commercial fishers and exported.

Concessions granted by the Minister for Primary Industries enable ongoing commercial exploitation of sub-legal fish.

And the 2012 Ministerial decision to retain the existing Concessions effectively set a new minimum legal size in CRA3 (Gisborne), CRA7 (Otago) and CRA8 (Southland).

Concessions permit 52mm and 53mm tail width crayfish to be landed in one area when that is illegal in an adjacent region.

The New Zealand Sport Fishing Council advocates that all Concessions need to be revoked immediately.

Concession fisheries

In CRA3 (Gisborne) a stock rebuild plan was implemented in 1993. The Concession was to mitigate the economic impacts of a 50 percent reduction in commercial catch levels.

In Otago the CRA7 Concession permitted fishers to land crayfish small enough so their tails could be canned.

In CRA8 the Concession was granted on the understanding that mature crayfish were smaller in Southland than elsewhere.

Are Concessions warranted?

No. After 1993 there was a prolonged recovery in CRA3 biomass, although this has been eroded by ongoing exploitation of immature fish.

Permitting commercial removals of undersize crayfish before they become available to the Gisborne public is inexcusable. Recreational harvest has plummeted, particularly in areas close to town.

It is highly objectionable that a tool that was generously introduced as a temporary measure, to prevent economic disaster, is now being used as a reallocation tool for commercial benefit, creating unnecessary conflict.

CRA7 (Otago) serves as a classic example of what happens when Concessions continue to apply after the original purpose is invalidated. The cannery has long-closed, but it seems commercial fishers have become addicted to sub-legal crayfish and cannot be voluntarily weaned.

In CRA8 (Southland) it was assumed that a narrower tail for females equated to an equivalently mature fish further north. Now we know the biology is not that simple and the Concession does not provide equality across regions. It does permit large numbers of immature females to be removed from the Southland stock.

Effects of Concessions

Concessions result in greater numbers of crayfish being landed per tonne of quota. This leaves fewer mature fish to recruit into the adult stock, increasing the risk to egg production and genetic diversity.

While we remain so ignorant of recruitment patterns and inter-dependencies the Council cautions against taking immature crayfish, and creating unnecessary biological risks.

It is encouraging however, that a recent meeting of joint interests in CRA7 and 8 agreed to strive for more abundant and stable fisheries. Advocates in other areas would likely endorse similar goals, for higher abundance, if given the opportunity.

Recreational access to small fish?

In January the Ministry sought clarification, does the NZSFC support a proposal to allow recreational fishers access to Concession-size crayfish?

The reply, in part, “It is the recorded position of the NZSFC that no [cray]fish below the minimum legal size should be taken in any area. The Council objects in the strongest possible terms to the proposal and views it as nothing less than an offer to share the spoils of crime with a view to building acceptance of the crime”.

“The numbers of Concession fish in the catch is unrecorded, the effect on stocks is unknown, the influence on CPUE [Catch Per Unit of Effort] is unknown, the sustainability risks are unknown; Concessions need to be abandoned immediately and not used as a Trojan horse for reducing [the] minimum legal size.”

The NZ Sport Fishing Council’s February submission details ongoing management concerns.
www.nzsportfishing.org.nz-Fisheries-Submissions